

Lake County News Sun Editorial, May 14, 2008

We knew it was coming, and yet it's still a shocking sight: \$4-a-gallon gas. That stunning milestone price at the pump has finally reached Lake County. We're going to have to swallow hard and cough up more hard-earned cash to feed our oil addiction. But once we get over that initial disbelief and outrage, we should also ask ourselves whether we've done anything about it. It's easy to complain, but have we really changed our driving habits? Forbes magazine recently estimated the average commuter's gasoline cost in the Chicago region totaled about \$6.23 a day.

High gas prices will hurt our pocketbooks, but the silver lining is they should start forcing us to start thinking about ways to reduce consumption. For too long, we've simply shrugged our shoulders at rising fuel costs. With some experts predicting we haven't seen the ceiling yet, perhaps we're finally reaching a breaking point where griping turns into action.

Certainly altering personal habits is part of the solution. Consolidating trips, carpooling, and walking or biking on short trips -- coincidentally, this is National Bike to Work Week -- are just a few of the changes we can make. Taking public transit is another option. It is estimated taking mass transit in the region saves more than \$1 billion in gasoline costs.

To that end, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, along with two other suburban Chicago lawmakers, proposed one solution this week, announcing a bill that would give employers tax credits instead of tax deductions for offering employees incentives to take public transportation to work. Under the Creating Opportunities to Motivate Mass-transit Utilization to Encourage Ridership (COMMUTER) Act, employees would receive up to \$1,380 in free mass transit each year; employers would receive tax credits of \$690 per employee. A study by Business Week magazine estimates that 53 percent of employees would take public transportation if employers provided transit benefits.

Kirk's bill is the kind of shift in thinking we need to see, in addition to significant investment in alternative energy sources and more fuel-efficient vehicles. Unfortunately, Congress remains gridlocked about what to do about soaring energy costs while we feel the pinch.

That psychologically significant day of \$4 for gas has arrived. The question is, how will we respond?